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A MAJOR NAVAL OPERATION DURING THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

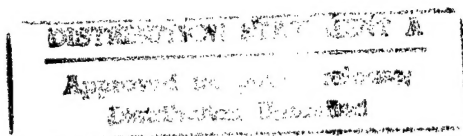
BY

MAJOR RICHARD M. BECKINGER

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The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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## **A Major Naval Operation During The American Civil War**

"The navy under Porter was all it could be, during the entire campaign. Without its assistance the campaign could not have been successfully made with twice the number of men," U. S. Grant.<sup>1</sup>

I believe the taking of Vicksburg involved a major naval operation that was part of the campaign to open the Mississippi River during the American Civil War. I will demonstrate that the operational objective (Vicksburg) in the western theater of war could only be accomplished by a series of related land/naval engagements and battles, synchronized in time and place, under the control of a single commander and plan (Grant's) that contributed to the Union's strategic objective of clearing the Mississippi. I believe the purpose, objective, characteristics and type of operations conducted, prior to and during the battle for Vicksburg, can be validated as a major naval operation as defined in modern terms. I will demonstrate that this was the first wartime operation conducted by the US Navy in "littoral waters." These operations ranged from blockade (closure of the Red River and siege of Vicksburg by Porter to deny resupply/reinforcement of the city) to amphibious operations (the initial failure of Sherman's assault, Grant's canal, the bayou expeditions and the unopposed landing at Bruinsburg). I will compare Gallipoli and Vicksburg to demonstrate why this is the first example of operational art executed by American Naval Forces. I will use the operational functions as the foundation to analyze these two operations. I will also present counter-arguments on why Vicksburg is not an example of operational art. The counter-arguments are that: the opening of the Mississippi River was not a campaign, that Vicksburg was not a major operation, that inland waters do not constitute operational space; that this operation was actually a joint, major army operation

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<sup>1</sup>Grant, p. 338.

and that Grant was not the western theater of war commander. In my summary, I will show that the evidence I have presented from historical accounts of that era clearly indicate that Vicksburg was a major naval operation as defined in contemporary literature.

### **Vicksburg as a Major Naval Operation**

"It is no exaggeration of the services rendered in the late war by the navy of the United States, to say that without its aid the armies of the Union would not have been successful." Ernest M. Eller, Rear Admiral, U.S.N. (Ret)<sup>2</sup>

It is generally agreed in current literature that major naval operations are conceived and executed to accomplish decisive results during times of war.<sup>3</sup> A review of the strategic, as well as operational objectives, purpose and characteristics of the events leading up to the conquest of Vicksburg meet the parameters of this definition.

The strategic aim in this war was Union reunification.<sup>4</sup> To accomplish this aim, four objectives were identified (the naval objectives being decided early in the war). These objectives were: blockade of the Southern Coast, opening of the Mississippi River, taking the war to the South's economy and people, and the capture of Richmond.<sup>5</sup> It is an accurate statement that the Navy was to prove instrumental in accomplishing all of these objectives.<sup>6</sup> The opening of the Mississippi River was a strategic objective to key Union officials from the very start of the conflict.<sup>7</sup>

Vicksburg ultimately became an operational objective after several tactical objectives had been accomplished. These tactical successes ranged from the

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<sup>2</sup> Eller, p. 344.

<sup>3</sup> Vego, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Catton, p. 61.

<sup>5</sup> Parker, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Eller, pp. 344-345.

<sup>7</sup> Everhart, p. 300.

taking of New Orleans on 1 May 1862 in the South to Grant's advance toward Vicksburg from the North (beginning in the early winter of 1862). The ultimate purpose remained to open the Mississippi to Northern commerce, divide the Southern rebellion in half and deny the Southern heartland resupply from the west. Offensive, joint operations proved to be the military method of choice in securing the Mississippi River.

"Under their direction the two services worked together in perfect accord...Porter...never sought to assert or emphasize his independence of the others authority; and he gave his full support to the army, whether asked or unasked..," James R. Soley.<sup>8</sup>

These early operations leading up to Vicksburg were triumphant because of Grant's advance being aided by the Navy, initially under Acting Rear Admiral Foote, starting from Ohio, then Captain Henry Davis in securing the Mississippi Valley, and then later in cooperation with Porter, starting in the fall of 1862 when he was named commander of the Mississippi Flotilla.<sup>9</sup> During these operations, the Navy provided indirect, as well as direct fire support, transportation and, by moving parallel with Grant on the inland rivers, functioned as his right flank.<sup>10</sup>

The characteristics of major naval operations are that they be conducted in a maritime area of operation, that they occur in a theater of war, that these operations are prolonged in nature, that they are planned and synchronized by a single commander, and that they be part of a long term plan.<sup>11</sup>

The Mississippi River was absolutely a maritime area of operation during this conflict with extensive operations conducted by Farragut in the South and Porter in the North. These activities did not occur in the type of sectors that characterized the relatively independent actions of the blockading Fleets in the Eastern Gulf of Mexico and in the North and South Atlantic (Farragut with his

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<sup>8</sup> Soley, "Naval," p. 251.

<sup>9</sup> Soley, Great, p. 559.

<sup>10</sup> Soley, "Naval," p. 252.

<sup>11</sup> Vego, pp. 5-7.

Western Gulf of Mexico Fleet was the exception, as he frequently conducted operations with Porter, as well as joint efforts with the army before and after Vicksburg). Porter, alone during his two years in command of the Mississippi Squadron, controlled over 150 vessels of all types and secured over 3,000 miles of navigable waterways making a significant contribution to the Union's ultimate success.<sup>12</sup> It is quite clear that major naval operations occurred in the waters of the Mississippi River, starting in the fall of 1862 when Porter and Grant's joint operation began, and ending with the surrender of Port Hudson on 8 July 1863 (the fall of Vicksburg on the 4th of July made continued defense of this position untenable). These operations, conducted by the Navy, were demonstrably longer than the type of operations that are currently identified as tactical in nature and ultimate outcome. Though the campaign to open the Mississippi occurred in very limited space in terms of the width of the river, with smaller forces and objectives than those that would differentiate major naval operations in this century, its sheer size and importance to the Union indicate the accomplishment of what we now call operational art. The Mississippi River, with over 1,244,000 square miles of drainage, 31 tributaries and traveling over 2,348 miles, exceeds the Mediterranean's 969,000 square miles in size.<sup>13</sup> The amphibious landing at Gallipoli of 1915 in the Mediterranean, which is currently touted as the first example of the practice of naval operational art is dwarfed in size when compared to Grant's and Porter's operation on the river.<sup>14</sup> The Mississippi River was part of the western theater, and its inland waters were of greater strategic importance than coastal or high-sea actions during this war. To argue that the high seas and coastal areas can only occupy operational space is not logical in terms of major naval activity in this war or today's current emphasis on the importance of "littoral

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<sup>12</sup> Soley, "Naval," p. 235.

<sup>13</sup> Micropedia, Vol I and Hammond World Atlas, p. 188.

<sup>14</sup> Vego, p. 2.

waters" in future major operations, as doctrinally expressed by the United States Navy in "From the Sea" and by the Marine Corps "Operational Maneuver From The Sea."

The decision to secure the Mississippi was made early in the war by General Winfield Scott and President Lincoln when they embraced the "Anaconda Plan," which was designed initially to secure the waterways of Tennessee (the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers) and ultimately the Mississippi River.<sup>15</sup> The western theater was clearly established when General Halleck was appointed as commander of that theater of war in the winter of 1862.<sup>16</sup> Halleck would later be appointed as commander of all Union forces, with Grant becoming the acting commander in the west, as commander Army of Tennessee (consisting of four Corps in two Armies), during the Vicksburg operation, until his official appointment in October 1863.<sup>17</sup> In his biography, Admiral Porter clearly indicates from his initial appointment as commander of the Mississippi Squadron (historically known as the "inland navy"), he would cooperate whenever and wherever Grant desired.<sup>18</sup> Grant was the operational commander from the initial attempt at taking Vicksburg (historically noted as 2 November 1862<sup>19</sup>) until its eventual downfall. He consistently consulted and maintained the cooperation of Admiral Porter from the beginning of their partnership.<sup>20</sup> Porter also shared the logistical base at Yazoo and ensured Grant's plan was synchronized during this major operation.<sup>21</sup> Among Porter's many contributions to the success of this major operation were the following: the forced passage of Vicksburg on 16 April 1863 to provide Grant with a naval shield and support for his amphibious landing at

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<sup>15</sup> Love, p. 284.

<sup>16</sup> Love, p. 285.

<sup>17</sup> Stofft, p. 259.

<sup>18</sup> Porter, p. 283.

<sup>19</sup> Grant, p. 250.

<sup>20</sup> Porter, p. 328.

<sup>21</sup> Soley, "Naval," pp. 333-334.

Bruinsburg on 30 April; his attempt to bombard Grand Gulf into submission (the initial landing site choice), and the re-establishment of Grant's logistical link to Yazoo, after his very successful inland expedition, leading up to the siege of Vicksburg on 18 May.<sup>22</sup> That a sound theater support structure existed, ranging from force protection to shared logistics with historical evidence of a single commander and plan, is further confirmation of the practice of operational art during this period.

### **Wartime Operations in "Littoral Waters"**

In wartime operations, to be considered operational art, major naval operations must be the main method of accomplishing operational and even strategic objectives.<sup>23</sup> During the Civil War, one of the four strategic objectives was accomplished mainly by the Navy and, in the remaining three, they were equal partners with the Army.<sup>24</sup> Civil War operations included amphibious landings, blockade, destruction of coastal installations and facilities and supporting ground forces on the coast and inland rivers. It is interesting to note that the Marine Corps doctrine concerning operational maneuver from the sea outlines all the fundamental principles, from focusing on an operational objective to integrating joint assets, that were fundamental to the major operation executed by Grant and Porter to take Vicksburg.<sup>25</sup>

"The experiments in the winter required Naval cooperation, they were classically amphibious, depending as much on Navy strength and skill as Army," Shelby Foote.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Soley, "Naval," pp. 315, 327, 331, and 334.

<sup>23</sup> Vego, p. 14.

<sup>24</sup> Eller, pp 333,344,345.

<sup>25</sup> Krulak, p. 6.

<sup>26</sup> Foote, p. 194.



Amphibious landings are consistently joint, regardless of the objective or size of forces employed and are focused on gaining access to a key land-based strategic objective.<sup>27</sup> The convergence of exterior lines and the conduct of amphibious operations, from the failures of Grant and Porter in the winter of 1863 (Sherman's initial assault, the bayou expeditions and Grants canal)<sup>28</sup> to their successful landing at Bruinsburg, were consistently focused on the operational objective of Vicksburg, which was centrally located and would have strategic results. Grant and Porter are the earliest American example of the successful practitioners of joint major operations.

Porter was instrumental in the siege of Vicksburg because of the blockade he established, above and below the city, with his fleet and the logistical lifeline he provided for Grant to his supply base at Yazoo. After replacing Farragut's blockade of the Red River and, in conjunction with his fleet's efforts already mentioned, no communication, reinforcements, supplies or escape were open to the rebels.<sup>29</sup>

### **Gallipoli and Vicksburg: A Comparison of Operational Art**

Both Gallipoli and Vicksburg were designed to isolate a belligerent, facilitate commerce, had amphibious landings, were joint operations and were based on a spirit of cooperation between the Army and the Navy. Both the British (Admiral de Robeck and Sir Ian Hamilton) and the American commanders during Vicksburg agreed to a joint operation based on cooperation prior to the start of the

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<sup>27</sup> Vego, p. 15.

<sup>28</sup> Everhart, p. 312.

<sup>29</sup> Soley, "Naval," p. 342.

operation.<sup>30</sup> The major difference between the two is that one was noteworthy for its success and the other for its deficiency in the application of operational art.

At Gallipoli, there was no real operational plan, other than lodgment and to reinforce what became a predictable fiasco, after the initial failure to expand the beachhead. In contrast to Grant and Porter, very poor cooperation between the Army and Navy was prevalent. Numerous examples of dismal teamwork on the part of the Navy exists, ranging from the withdrawal of needed indirect-fire support to refusal to run the Dardanelle Straits.<sup>31</sup> Robeck's refusal to force the Straits to relieve pressure on Hamilton conflicts markedly with Porter's willingness to run the guns on the heights of Vicksburg to ensure the success of Grant's plan. British inadequacies are in striking contrast to Grant's and Porter's spirited cooperation between October 1862 and July 1863. Grant, as the on-scene commander, consistently reassessed his plan to obtain success based on joint capabilities; General Ian Hamilton did not. The initial assaults of both failed: One, mainly an army effort; the other, solely a naval effort. Grant learned from his mistake and adjusted, while the British grudgingly deduced the Army would be needed for their operation to succeed.<sup>32</sup> Grant's operation was not burdened by logistical failures, ranging from shortages of manpower to ammunition, which was a trait of the British venture.<sup>33</sup> Grant practiced classical operational deception, afloat and ashore.<sup>34</sup> The British delayed for thirty days from initial naval repulse to amphibious landing, allowing the enemy to reinforce and doom the operation to defeat from the start.<sup>35</sup> It is readily apparent that Vicksburg is a better example of major naval operational art than Gallipoli with its failures in command and control from the top (Churchill would be forced to resign as First Lord of the Admiralty,

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<sup>30</sup> Churchill, pp. 605, 622.

<sup>31</sup> Churchill, pp. 683, 688.

<sup>32</sup> Crutwell, p. 210.

<sup>33</sup> Churchill, p. 711.

<sup>34</sup> Everhart, p. 304.

<sup>35</sup> Churchill, p. 649.

Lord Fisher forced to resign as First Sea Lord and Lord Kitchner demoted from Secretary of War),<sup>36</sup> logistical inadequacies, force protection deficiencies, absence of satisfactory maneuver (from initial invasion to the setback at "Sulva Bay") and leadership (the relief of Hamilton as commander Mediterranean force).<sup>37</sup>

### **Counter-Arguments**

The counter-arguments to Vicksburg not being a major naval operation are: The opening of the Mississippi River was not a campaign; that Vicksburg is a campaign and not a major operation; that operational space does not exist in inland waterways; that this was a joint army operation, and that Grant was not the commander of the western theater of war.

"Campaign—a series of related major independent, joint, or combined operations whose aim is to accomplish strategic objective(s) in a given theater of operations," Glossary of Operational Terms, Joint Military Operations (JMO).<sup>38</sup>

The opening of the Mississippi River was not a campaign, however, I would argue that by the above definition, this was a campaign. The strategic objective of opening the Mississippi was identified early in the war. The continuity in command went from Scott to Halleck and down to Grant. When Halleck replaced Scott as commander of Union forces, Grant became the western theater commander. Independent and joint operations are self-evident and plentiful during the first and final months of the campaign. In the final months, Farragut and Banks were operating in unison with Grant in an abortive attempt to take Port Hudson in the South.<sup>39</sup> General Rosecrans was conducting an independent operation with the

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<sup>36</sup> Churchill, p. 781.

<sup>37</sup> Crutwell, p. 226.

<sup>38</sup> Glossary, p. 15.

<sup>39</sup> Everhart, p. 305.

Army of the Cumberland in central Tennessee against General Bragg's Army of the Tennessee, denying Southern manpower that could have lifted the siege.

"Major Operations--a series of related tactical actions conducted by diverse combat arms of a single or several services and aimed to accomplish operational (and sometimes strategic) objectives" Glossary of Operational Terms, JMO.<sup>40</sup>

Vicksburg was a campaign and not a major operation. By the above terminology, Vicksburg is unmistakably a major operation and not a campaign. "Campaign" is used in historic terms in written narratives of that era and does not match today's contemporary meaning. Another counter-argument is that operational space cannot be found in inland waterways. I believe, based on strategic value, the Mississippi River exceeded the coastal and high seas in importance to the Union in 1863. The Mississippi River, though not a sea, meets the parameters for "littoral waters," that is, semi-enclosed, limited space, reduced forces, and objectives that are indicative of these types of major operations. The "inland navy" commanded by Porter on the Mississippi is a far better example of operational art than Gallipoli, which apparently is considered as such only because it occurred on a sea and had larger surface combatants. The argument that Vicksburg is not a major naval operation but a joint major army operation is a circular one. Vicksburg would still be a major naval operation, regardless of who drafted the plan, and provided more forces. A joint major naval operation, as currently defined, is one that is conceived and executed by the Navy in conjunction with other forces.<sup>41</sup> By this terminology, it could be a joint army operation and still be a major naval operation.

The final argument is that Grant was not the western theater commander. Grant, as commander of the Army of Tennessee, contacted Halleck in January

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<sup>40</sup> Glossary, p. 15.  
<sup>41</sup> Vego, p. 8.

1863 and informed him of his intention to consolidate the four western departments under his control (this included Rosecrans in the North and Banks in the South), unless otherwise directed.<sup>42</sup> Halleck informed him that he had control of both banks of the Mississippi for this operation and that he also had Lincoln's full support. I believe it is clear that Grant is the western theater of war commander from the time of Halleck's departure in the fall of 1862 until his official appointment in the fall of 1863.

### **Summary**

In summary, I believe I have clearly demonstrated that Vicksburg is the first example of major naval operational art. Based on historic accounts of the participants (Grant and Porter) and noted historians' descriptions of that era (Catton, Foote, Everhart and Soley), the contemporary meaning of operational art is evident at Vicksburg. I have reviewed the strategic and operational objectives, purpose and characteristics of the events leading up to Vicksburg to meet the parameters of why it is a major naval operation. I have outlined the operational characteristics of warfare in "littoral waters," focusing on the blockade and amphibious operations conducted by Grant and Porter during Vicksburg. I have conducted a comparison of operational art at Gallipoli and Vicksburg to demonstrate why Vicksburg is a far better example to learn from with its successful application of the operational factors. In contrasting the similarities and differences in the application of operational art at Gallipoli and Vicksburg, I, again,

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<sup>42</sup> Foote, p. 145.

relied heavily on the narratives of key participants to strengthen my argument. Furthermore, I have provided an extensive series of counter-arguments based in part on current definitions of major operations and campaigns of potential weaknesses in my thesis. I am satisfied that the validity of my thesis is stronger than the possible counter-points addressed. In conclusion, I believe I have shown that the taking of Vicksburg involved a major naval operation that was part of the campaign to open the Mississippi River during the American Civil War.

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